

Title

Managing Trolling in Online Communities: An Organizational Perspective

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Purpose

The literature lacks knowledge on how organizations can manage trolling behaviors in online communities. Extant studies tend to either focus on user responses to trolling behaviors (i.e., a micro-level perspective) or how the trolling infrastructure is governed by platforms (i.e., a macro-level perspective), paying less attention to the organizational community host. With more organizations hosting online communities on social media networks and trolling behaviors increasingly disrupting user engagement within these communities, the current understanding of trolling management practices has become inapt. Given the commercial and social damage caused by trolling behaviors, it is important to understand how these can be best managed. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the meso-level perspective of trolling management by focusing on organizational practice.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The research design consists of an in-depth non-participatory netnography based on a case study of PETA's ('People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals') Facebook community.

Findings

Six distinct trolling management strategies are identified and categorized by their direct versus indirect communication approach: non-engaging, educating, bolstering, expurgating, asserting,

and mobilizing. Some strategies are deemed to be more successful than others in generating positive community outcomes such as reduced trolling frequency or further support from like-minded community members.

Originality/value

The findings contribute to the meso-level perspective in the trolling management literature by introducing a novel, empirically informed typology of organizational trolling management strategies.

Keywords: *online community; social media networks; online misbehavior; trolling management; netnography*

1. Introduction

Trolling represents a form of deliberate online misbehavior with the primary goal to aggravate or disrupt online communication and interactions (Hardaker, 2010). Over the last couple of decades trolling has attracted the attention of researchers due to its pervasiveness in online communities (Mihaylov *et al.*, 2018; Shachaf and Hara, 2010). For instance, 18% of Internet users have personally experienced trolling, while 86% are familiar with this misbehavior (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Early studies further demonstrate that trolling can be associated with psychological distress for both the perpetrator and the victim (Binns, 2012; Thacker and Griffiths, 2012), and more recent work shows that trolling has negative consequences for the organizational hosts of online communities (Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Mihaylov *et al.*, 2018). Authors suggest that trolling creates a hostile online environment, which discourages users from interacting with others as well as the company (Phillips, 2011), and ultimately causes some users to disengage from the community (Pew Research Center, 2017). Importantly, Johnson (2018) and Noble *et al.* (2012) illustrate that online community users attribute responsibility for the management of trolling to the organizational hosts of these communities. Thus, if trolling remains unaddressed, this can lead to reputational or financial losses (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016). Nevertheless, research to date investigating how trolling in online communities can be managed has been limited, leading to recent calls for more research into the organizational perspective (e.g., Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017).

Consequently, this article aims to bring greater clarity to this under-researched phenomenon by demonstrating how organizations may respond to trolling behaviors within their online communities. Specifically, we were guided by the following research question (RQ):

RQ. *How do organizations manage trolling occurrences in their online communities?*

To address this question, we use PETA's ('People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals') official Facebook community as a case study and utilize a netnographic observation of trolling instances and corresponding organizational interventions within the community. Our findings contribute to the information management literature by offering a novel, empirically informed typology comprising six trolling management strategies. The typology further complements existing perspectives on trolling management and offers new insights into the under-researched meso-level perspective.

2. Trolling in online communities

2.1. Defining trolling behaviors

Trolling represents a multifaceted form of online misbehavior and as such the interdisciplinary literature on trolling still lacks conceptual clarity on what trolling constitutes (Hardaker, 2010; Herring *et al.*, 2002). Using the umbrella term 'trolling', several definitions of this misbehavior have been proposed revolving around its provocative nature, intentionality, and the context in which it occurs, but these conceptualizations vary considerably (see Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) for a review). In this study, we adopt the definition of trolling proposed by Buckels *et al.* (2014): 'the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose' (p. 97).

In online community settings, two notable studies provided an account of the main characteristics and behavioral types of trolling. On the one hand, Cruz *et al.* (2018) attributed the occurrence of trolling to the intersection of three social practices: it starts with gaining knowledge about the community's ethos and context (i.e., learning), continues with acquiring skills to appear as a genuine community member (i.e., assimilation) and ends with transgression (i.e., identifying an opportunity to troll and crafting a message that generates the desired adverse reaction). On the other hand, Sanfilippo *et al.* (2018), developed four distinct

behavioral types of trolling (i.e., serious trolling, serious non-trolling, humorous trolling, humorous non-trolling) based on several dimensions including provocation, intentionality, pseudo-sincerity, and repetition, among others.

While these typologies of trolling behaviors adequately captured the main characteristics of trolling, they failed to account for a distinctive form of trolling that has emerged on social media communities run by organizations to generate consumer support (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018). Demsar *et al.* (2021) proposed that mainstream media has largely facilitated this evolved form of trolling directed at brands/organizations and/or their supporters, which we term here ‘social media brand trolling’. As such, a key differentiating consequence of trolling in a consumption context is that it can damage the organization’s image and divert users from desirable behaviors such as word-of-mouth, purchase intentions and activism (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017).

2.2. Trolling versus other online misbehaviors

Trolling has been differentiated from other online misbehaviors such as cyber-bullying, consumer conflicts, flaming and negative word-of-mouth (nWOM) (Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). While these misbehaviors share some common attributes – malice, aggression, and deliberation – trolling possesses certain distinguishing characteristics, as shown in Table I. Specifically, a fundamental difference between trolling and other uncivil online discourse relates to the interaction context (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018). Trolling comments often occur with no apparent interest in the topic of discussion or emotional involvement with the organization. On the contrary, other uncivil online behaviors are associated with features that tend to reveal a degree of meaning and/or involvement with the topic of the discursive engagement (Rossini, 2020).

In contrast to cyber-bullying, which is characterized by aggression, intention, repetition, and power imbalance (Langos, 2012), trolling does not necessarily include power imbalance between the troll and the target, and it is often undirected as well as a one-off occurrence (Buckels *et al.*, 2014). A further distinction is the presence of a pre-existing relationship between the cyber-bully and the victim, whereas trolling is less targeted and purposive (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016). A key differentiator between trolling and consumer conflicts is that trolling is not intended for a specific community member, while online conflicts represent a two-way exchange between specific users of an online community (Dineva *et al.*, 2017). As such, trolling can be an antecedent of consumer conflicts (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018).

Flaming, which has been defined as the expression of strong emotions including name-calling, profanity, swearing and insults (Kwon and Gruzd, 2017), differs from trolling on the basis of lack of deception, which represents a key characteristic of trolling (Hardaker, 2010). Furthermore, whereas trolling is a deliberate act intended to provoke others and is often unprovoked itself, flaming involves a degree of disinhibition often resulting from provocation (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). Lastly, a dissatisfactory experience with a company is what distinguishes nWOM from trolling. While nWOM is described as negative communication about a company and frequently results from a dissatisfactory user experience (Hornik *et al.*, 2019), trolling does not require prior experience with the company or company redress (Reynolds and Harris, 2005).

	Motivation	Interaction context	Actors involved	Occurrence
<i>Trolling</i>	To provoke, disrupt, deceive	Undirected, unprovoked; no apparent interest in the topic	One-to-many	Typically one-off; can be repeated

<i>Cyber-bullying</i>	To harm, harass, intimidate, coerce	Directed towards a specific user	One-to-one	Multiple, repeated
<i>Consumer conflict</i>	To express divergent opinions related to consumerism	Directed towards other users; involvement with the topic	One-to-one; Many-to-many	Multiple
<i>Flaming</i>	To disinhibit, to insult	Undirected; involvement with the topic	One-to-one; Many-to-many	One-off or multiple
<i>nWOM</i>	To express dissatisfaction	Directed towards other users and companies; involvement with the topic	One-to-many	One-off

Table I. Online misbehaviors and their characteristics

2.3. Trolling management

The interdisciplinary literature on trolling management can be broadly divided into two main perspectives. On the one hand, some scholars proposed that trolling can be managed using appropriate strategies that depend on the nature and aims of the online space in which trolling occurs (Coles and West, 2016; Hardaker, 2015; Herring *et al.*, 2002). These recommendations emphasized that trolling management is done at the micro-level and thus individual instances of trolling should be independently addressed when they occur. This view on trolling management is indeed suited to smaller, close-knit communities where moderation depends on volunteer moderators, regular users who are familiar with one another as well as a history of interactions that provides the familiarity and trust necessary for a moderator to arbitrate between aggrieved parties (Gillespie, 2017; Suler and Phillips, 1998).

On the other hand, as communities have grown and changed to be hosted on large scale platforms with new content and members added at an unstoppable pace, this micro view on moderation has been challenged (Lampe *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, researchers recommended what can be categorized as the macro-level approach to trolling management whereby platforms (as opposed to Internet users) adopt more proactive trolling moderation mechanisms. These include limiting, minimizing or eliminating the factors and circumstances that facilitate this deviant online behavior (Binns, 2012; Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Gillespie, 2017; Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017; Jenks, 2019). Here, we review these perspectives, while arguing that there is another important approach to managing trolling behaviors (i.e., the meso-level), which has been overlooked in the literature.

First, the micro-level approach to trolling management mainly consists of individual moderator practices and is inherent to communities hosted by users who have an interest in the same topic or activity (i.e., tertiary hosts) (Gillespie, 2017). A commonly adopted passive coping mechanism, which adheres to this approach, is ignoring the troll (e.g., Binns, 2012; Coles and West, 2016; Hardaker, 2015). Through intentionally disregarding this behavior, this strategy is expected to discourage the troll from teasing and provoking others, because it deprives the troll from attention. Alternatively, more active and involved practices proposed by Herring *et al.* (2002) and Sanfilippo *et al.* (2017) include the administrative banning of trolls or deleting their posts, refuting the claims made by the troll, unmasking anonymous trolls, insulting the troll, and negotiating appropriate behaviors. Similarly, Hardaker (2015) identified several management techniques adopted by users of various online newsgroups. The key responses to trolling include exposing the troll to other users, challenging the troll, criticizing the effectiveness/success of the trolling, mocking, or parodying the trolling attempt, and reciprocating in kind by trolling the troll.

A more democratic approach to dealing with trolls is proposed by Jenks (2019) who recommended that online forum moderators should accept the troll into the conversation, provided that the trolling instance is mild and unharmed to other users. Alternatively, the conversation should be put on hold until the consequences of the trolling instance are determined. If the misbehavior is deemed to be particularly adverse, Jhaver *et al.* (2018) suggested adding the transgressor to a blacklist, so that they can no longer interact with the victims.

In contrast to the micro-level perspective, the macro-level approach to trolling management put forward preemption whereby a set of expected norms and behaviors are established, which platform users are expected to conform to (Lampe *et al.*, 2014). More specifically, Gillespie (2017) argued that platforms as the primary hosts of online communities have an obligation beyond a financial reward to nurture healthy user engagement and communities. Given this, the author suggested that platforms should proactively monitor the social media and when offensive content such as trolling is identified, this content is either removed or marked as such to help users avoid it. A related trolling management approach is 'gamification' (Binns, 2012). The approach involves adopting video games techniques in non-gaming contexts (e.g., Wikipedia) to address trolling. Gamification includes rewarding desirable behaviors through awarding tokens, which in turn facilitates an overall positive online environment and discourages deviant behaviors from taking place. Deterding *et al.* (2011) proposed an additional technique to gamification used to discourage trolling from occurring. This technique consists of a requirement to 'sign in' to the online community to be able to interact with other users. Importantly, it is suggested that this mechanism reduces anonymity, which is still prevalent in many online discussion boards, forums, and chat rooms (Kordyaka *et al.*, 2020) and consequently renders the troll traceable.

In line with managing the trolling infrastructure, Cruz *et al.* (2018) tentatively recommended that online communities should shift from addressing the behaviors of individual trolls and instead manage the social practices (i.e., learning, assimilation, transgression) that enable this online misbehavior. Similarly, Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) provided recommendations on how to combat trolling through managing its building blocks and facilitating factors. Specifically, the authors differentiated between minimizing or eliminating the effects associated with trolling including building awareness, reducing provocations, rewarding the reporting of trolling, and enforcing sanctions.

With few conceptual exceptions the reviewed studies investigated the management of trolling from a user perspective, which is largely due to the nature of the online spaces examined (i.e., user-hosted online communities, forums, and newsgroups). In contrast, more general suggestions on managing trolling come from studies on the governance of platforms (Gillespie, 2010; Gillespie, 2017). However, we argue that when companies host online communities (i.e., secondary hosts), they have a responsibility to manage trolling. This, in turn, necessitates the development of a third perspective on trolling management – the meso-level approach, as shown in Figure 1. This is due to the disruptive nature of trolling that prevents the organizational host from promoting their agenda to online community members (Noble *et al.*, 2012). While some of the proposed strategies thus far (e.g., sanctioning trolling, establishing a set of expected norms and behaviors) may be suitable for secondary hosts of online communities, it is not yet established how and whether organizations can implement these. Moreover, the essence of some of the trolling management recommendations to date involves moderating the social practices (Cruz *et al.*, 2018) or minimizing facilitating factors (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017) that encourage trolling behaviors. Such an approach may be counter-productive to organization-hosted online communities due to its impact on the overall community engagement based on which the success of the online community is determined.



Figure 1. Current perspectives on trolling management

Other disciplines have begun to generate preliminary insight into the organizational practice on managing various online misbehaviors (e.g., cyber-bullying, incivility, consumer conflicts) (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Langos, 2012). However, as outlined earlier, trolling represents a unique deviant behavior and thus requires different management techniques to those used when moderating other deviant online behaviors.

3. Method

This study sets out to gain an understanding of the organizational perspective when managing trolling in online communities. We adopted an interpretative qualitative research approach by employing the method of netnography. The study's procedure is illustrated in Figure 2. Netnography represents methodical observation and collection of relevant data that emerge through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002; Wang, 2019). A primary

consideration when employing netnography is the level of participation of researchers, which can range from a non-participatory, passive observer role to an active, fully participatory role (Kozinets, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the authors adopted a non-participatory role since active participation would have likely influenced the intensity and/or frequency of trolling (Elliott *et al.*, 2005).

The chosen online community is run by the nongovernmental organization PETA and is based on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/official.peta/>). The community has over 5.5 million users and its purpose is to encourage discussions and activism around the organization's mission, which involves the promotion of animal rights and welfare. We chose PETA as a case study for several reasons. First, PETA's Facebook community had the presence of the type of content required for this study i.e., regular content moderation by the organization as well as trolling comments (Kozinets, 2002). We thus implemented a single holistic design, following Yin's (2017) prescriptions on case study research as well as others in utilizing a single unit of analysis (e.g., Cova and Pace, 2006). This allowed us to obtain maximum instrumentality in answering the study's research question. Second, compared with more commercially oriented online communities, an activist, nongovernmental organization like PETA attracts more severe and prominent instances of trolling due to its unique ideological nature (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2015; Hassay and Pelozo, 2009). This makes an interesting case study for trolling management. Third, in line with Kozinets' (2002) recommendations on study site selection for netnographic observations, we chose PETA due to the first researcher's familiarity and pre-existing knowledge of the organization. This in turn facilitated a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances and community ethos surrounding trolling and the corresponding moderation practices.

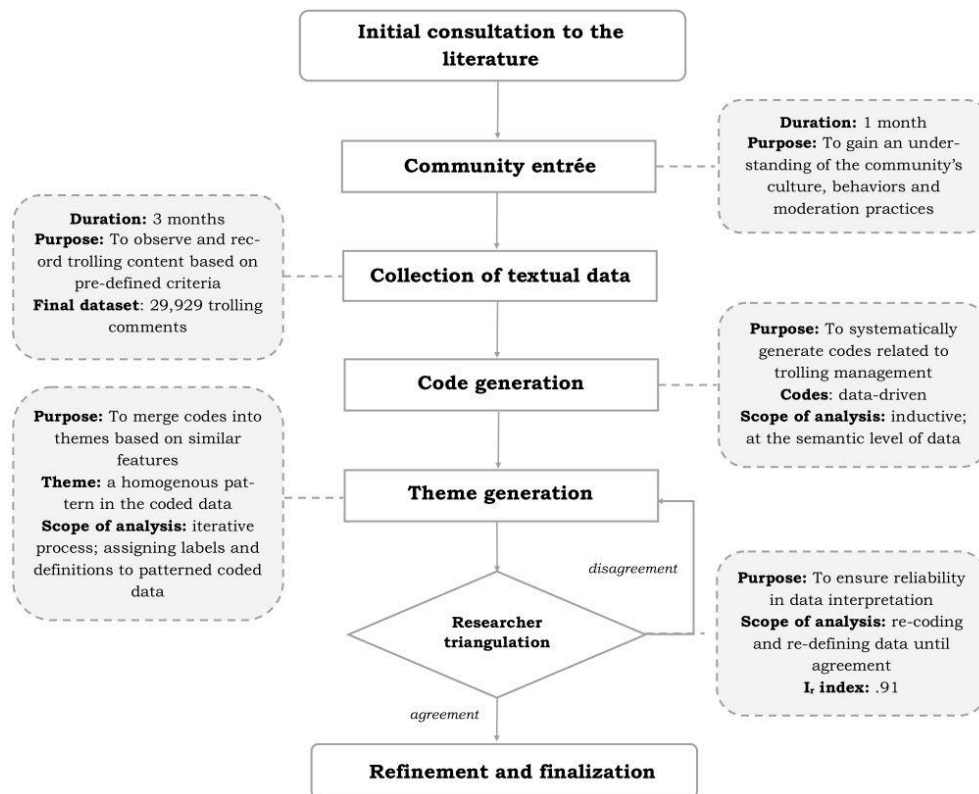


Figure 2. Study Procedure

Before data collection commenced, the authors spent a month in the chosen online community as part of the *entrée* stage (Kozinets, 2002). This enabled the researchers to gain a preliminary understanding about the nature of the trolling behaviors that occur in the online community and how the community moderators manage such behaviors. Following the *entrée* stage, the netnographic observation was conducted over a three-month period and relevant data were collected on a daily basis. The total four-month period was deemed sufficient by the authors in adequately addressing the study's research question, and data saturation was reached (i.e., no additional data were identified that rendered new trolling management insights) (Fusch and Ness, 2015). The type of data collected was restricted to the collection of relevant content (i.e., trolling comments and corresponding organizational intervention posts), which is comparable to past netnographic studies (e.g., Chung *et al.*, 2020; Seraj, 2012).

To ensure that we correctly identified trolling behaviors and distinguished these from other online misbehaviors (i.e., cyber-bullying, flaming, consumer conflict, nWOM), we were

guided by the key distinguishing attributes of trolling derived from past research and outlined in Table I. Thus, for a trolling instance to be deemed as one, the authors agreed that it must include the following characteristics: provocation, intentionality, pseudo-sincerity, satire and no apparent instrumental purpose/lack of genuine interest or emotional involvement with the topic of discussion/organization.

The dataset consisted of 29,929 trolling comments and included both passive and active organizational interventions. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach when analyzing the data. The first phase involved familiarization with the dataset through continuously reading and re-reading the dataset and noting down initial codes. During this phase, an agreement was reached regarding the following three areas: (1) a theme constitutes a level of patterned response or meaning within the data i.e., a trolling management strategy; (2) themes are identified in an inductive manner that is strongly linked with the data (as opposed to theory-driven themes); and (3) data are analyzed at the explicit (i.e., semantic) level, which involves identifying themes at the surface meaning of the data (DeCuir-Gunby *et al.*, 2011).

In the second phase, we began to systematically generate codes across the entire dataset based on identifying a feature of the data that related to organizational trolling management. The third phase involved the collation of codes into potential overarching themes based on their unifying features and similarities. In the fourth phase, the themes were refined to ensure that data within the constructed themes cohere together in a meaningful manner (i.e., internal homogeneity), while clear and identifiable distinctions between themes exist (i.e., external heterogeneity) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final phases involved developing labels and definitions for each theme that are representative of all the codes within each distinctive theme.

As part of the analysis, codes and themes were independently analyzed by the two authors, and these were subsequently compared, and any differences were discussed. Hence,

the authors engaged in an iterative process of re-coding and re-defining themes until a satisfactory level of agreement was reached (Decrop, 1999). The inter-rater reliability index ($I_r = .91$) calculated using proportional agreement (Rust and Cooil, 1994) suggested an acceptable level of agreement and reliability.

4. Results

We identified six distinct organizational trolling management strategies ranging from a passive, *non-engaging* approach to more active and involved strategies, which include *educating*, *bolstering*, *expurgating*, *asserting*, and *mobilizing*, as shown in Table II. We further categorized these strategies based on whether they *directly* or *indirectly* addressed the trolling behavior. Table II further shows the frequency of each strategy and whether it is a novel addition to the literature or similar to past conceptualizations of trolling management mechanisms. In reporting our findings on the different organizational trolling management strategies, we provide data exemplars that best represent each strategy, as prescribed by Nowell *et al.* (2017). The names in these exemplars are all fictional in order to ensure participant anonymity.

	Strategy (theme)	Strategy (codes)	Definition	Frequency	Strategy outcome
Indirect strategies <i>Used to deprive the troll/trolling comments from direct attention</i>	Non-engaging ^a	Avoiding intervening in the trolling Ignoring the trolling/the troll	The organization does not take any action to intervene in a trolling incident	77%	No change in the frequency or severity of trolling comments
	Bolstering ^a	Agreeing with users who defend the organization in trolling incidents Thanking users who support the organization during trolling incidents	The organization affirms a supporter comment in a trolling incident	4%	Generates further support from like-minded community members
	Educating ^b	Clarifying an issue causing the trolling to occur Providing additional information/justification on a topic resulting in trolling	The organization provides educational information about an ethical issue causing the trolling	6%	No change in the frequency of trolling comments

Direct strategies <i>Used to explicitly address the troll/trolling comments</i>	Expurgating ^a	Removing trolling comments when requested by other users	The organization permanently removes trolling comments	1%	Stops repeated trolling comments
	Asserting ^b	Posting a mission-related comment with no explanation or justification Posting a forceful/opinionated statement	The organization makes a value-laden statement about an ethical issue causing the trolling	3%	Reduces the frequency of trolling comments
	Mobilizing ^b	Making an appeal during a trolling incident for users to change their behavior Urging trolls to reconsider their stance	The organization urges trolls to take action towards an ethical issue	9%	Reduces the frequency of trolling comments

Note. ^a Similar strategies identified in past research; ^b Strategies unique to organizational community hosts

Table II. Organizational trolling management strategies

4.1. Trolling management indirectly aimed at the troll

Strategies aimed at intervening with the trolling indirectly include non-engaging, educating and bolstering. When using these strategies, the organization deprives the troll from attention through deliberately not engaging with the trolling behavior or indirectly disagreeing with the troll's comment (i.e., by providing further information to reinforce the organization's stance or affirming others who support the organization's values).

Non-engaging

Non-engaging represents a trolling management strategy whereby the organization does not take any action to moderate the trolling comments. The organization used this strategy in most trolling instances. The following data excerpt shows a typical trolling incident where multiple trolling behaviors occur and which the organization ignored.

Dan Fisher: Human beings have eaten animals since they evolved and were able to hunt. Do you think lions cook their food? No! Quit acting like its so bad to eat meat. Respect other choice to eat meat when they respect vegans [*sic*]

Tom Espinoza: it is sad to eat meat you nasty troll

Dan Fisher: No its not. I'm actually quite happy and healthy when I eat it so trolling me won't make me sad (face with stuck-out tongue and winking eye emoji) [*sic*]

Marta Shields: Do you think lions don't kill rival lion's cubs? No! Quit acting like its so bad to murder children. Respect others choice to murder children when they respect non murderers. [*sic*]

Jack Reader: Marta you should be in a padded room somewhere.

Joanne Bain: Jack pretty sure she was taking the piss out of Dan (face with tears of joy emoji)

Jack Reader: Whatever I have some cows to deliver at a feed lot you people are nuts

Dora Randall: Quit eating vegetables and fruit! They are alive and have feelings! Quit drinking water! That's where fish live!

In this example, a comment posted by Dan Fisher who is perceived to be a troll due to using satire to mock organization's agenda regarding meat consumption provokes a number of hostile comments in response. The excerpt demonstrates further instances of trolling including the involvement of users who support Dan's comment (Jack Reader and Dora Randall) as well as advocates for the organization (Marta Shields) who reciprocate in kind by trolling the user who is perceived to be a troll. This represents a common trolling occurrence in PETA's online community, and during most such instances the community host chose to remain silent.

Another example of a non-engaging approach in a trolling incident is shown below.

Jack Reynolds: Update: Just took a bite out of my string cheese. Chugged a glass of milk

Joanna Johns: Congratulations, you have won the douchebag of the day reward.

Millie Evans: Feed your arteries!!! They can clog sooner!!!?!

Sean Roberts: I think @Jack will experience his own cruelty one day and realize just how low his IQ really is.

Andrea Talbot: Yawning intensifies. Trolling skills 1/10

Jack Reynolds: You two realize everything has a life... You kill microscopic organisms every second, plants are alive... Just because it can't talk.. Or you can't see it.. Doesn't mean it isn't alive.

Here, a user (Jack Reynolds) posts a comment that deliberately aims to provoke other users through mocking the organization's stance on the cruelty involved in the dairy industry. This is met by disapproval from other users through refuting the claims made by the troll (Sean Roberts), reciprocating in kind by trolling the troll (Millie Evans) and criticizing the effectiveness of the trolling (Andrea Talbot). This incident represents a clear opportunity for the organization to intervene and exert its stance, particularly since there is an element of repetition (i.e., a second trolling comment by the same user), but the organization adopts a non-

engaging strategy. In our observations, this strategy did not change the frequency or severity of further trolling instances.

Educating

Educating can be defined as a strategy whereby the organization provides educational information about an ethical issue in a trolling incident. The essence of this strategy is further explaining to trolls the rationale behind the organization's views on certain animal-rights-related issues. Educating is thus primarily used to manage trolling instances through providing further information that indirectly disagrees with the troll's comment. The data excerpt below exemplifies this:

Matt Sharpe: Dirty animal!

Andy Anari: You sure are

Matt Sharpe: Piss off you dirty trash

Sean Maxstadt: Hormonal disbalance, little boy? Puberty is such a difficult time, eh? (winking emoji)

Matt Sharpe: Yeah I'm really little...

Tom Sullins: You're a little defensive there mate. Are you on your period?

PETA: Mice and rats are fastidiously clean animals, grooming themselves several times a day.

In fact, rats and mice are less likely than dogs or cats to catch and transmit parasites and viruses.

In this excerpt, a user (Matt Sharpe) engages in trolling through provocation and no apparent instrumental purpose in relation to an organizational post about the use of rats in science. In this excerpt, several other users directly address the troll by reciprocating the trolling in kind. Subsequently, through one-way informational exchange, the organization implicitly disagrees with the troll and further reinforces the organization's stance on the topic in question.

Another instance illustrating a more subtle satirical trolling attempt characterized by mocking the organization and where the organization uses educating is shown in the following excerpt.

Garett Bennett: Nothing wrong with elephants in zoos! Not all zoos are bad PETA! Believe it or not...some even feed their elephants! (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes) (face with rolling eyes)

PETA: Zoos all over the US have closed their elephant exhibits or announced that they intend to phase them out, citing an inability to provide the animals with proper care. There is absolutely no ethical way to keep these intelligent, social animals in captivity.

In this excerpt, the organization provides additional information on the ethicality of zoos that caused the trolling comment by Garett Bennett. This information disagrees with the troll, but it does not outwardly dismiss his comment.

In our observations, the educating strategy was not successful in decreasing the frequency of subsequent trolling comments, but in some instances, it resulted in a minor improvement of the severity of these.

Bolstering

Bolstering is defined as the organization affirming a community member during a trolling incident. When using bolstering the organization indirectly disagrees with the troll's opinion by affirming the opinion(s) of those who support the organization. This is demonstrated in the following example.

David Mather: If people just had compassion for all animals, not just their pets...

Lisa Johns: Just because you eat meat doesn't mean you don't have compassion.

Evelyn Warren: @Lisa Johns you know Peta thinks that us meat eaters are horrible and thinks that we are too arrogant to see "the truth" I just say "tell the lions in Africa that..."

Rome Torres: The focus isn't on lions. The focus is on humans finding an unnecessary evil.

Jacquie McMullen: The lions comment is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. [*sic*]

Jenna Watson: Why do vegans give animals Human emotions. I doubt if animal could talk they would scream 'my baby' [*sic*]

Christos Baxter: *yawn* a pathetic troll attempt really.

PETA: Thank you for having #Compassion4All!

In this excerpt, community members who appear to support the organization's values refute the claims made by a comment perceived as trolling (Evelyn Warren). Subsequently, another trolling comment is posted by a separate user (Jenna Watson), which is dismissed as effective by another user (Christos Baxter). In turn, the organization posts a comment that affirms those users who support the organization by thanking them. Importantly, in this trolling exchange the organization deliberately addresses its supporters, while depriving the trolls from direct attention by choosing not to engage with their comments.

In fewer trolling instances, the organization added a forceful comment to complement the bolstering strategy, arguably to enhance the message strength, as shown in the following example:

Louise Hilton: Look at his tail wagging hes so happy lol! Beautiful story! It's ridiculous we don't need to kill animals for food anymore! [*sic*]

Mark Kay: you can be lovable and delicious all at the same time

PETA: No we do not! Animals have the right to not be exploited by humans for our passing pleasure. #NotOurs2Eat

In this data excerpt, a user (Mark Kay) posts a trolling comment with no instrumental purpose other than provoking a user who agrees with an organizational post regarding meat consumption. In turn, the organization intervenes by not only explicitly affirming the supporter's comment (Louise Hilton), but also by adding a statement that is strongly linked to the organization's values. Such intervention allows the community host to dismiss a comment made by a troll without acknowledging the troll and by providing verbal support for a like-

minded individual. While our observations did not show a reduction of trolling comments frequency or severity when utilizing a bolstering strategy, we noted an increase in comments from supporters of the organization such as in the example shown below.

PETA: @Jennifer Mueller Thanks for explaining supply & demand. (winking face emoji)

Jennifer Mueller: You're welcome! You can find any dog – size, breed and age at a shelter.

4.2. Trolling management directly aimed at the troll

Strategies directly addressing the troll include expurgating, asserting and mobilizing. When using these strategies, the organization explicitly sanctions the trolling behavior, directly disagrees with, or dismisses the trolling comments.

Expurgating

An example of an authoritative and direct trolling management strategy is expurgating, here defined as the organization permanently removing trolling comments. This is demonstrated in the following data excerpt where repeated trolling by the same user takes place as a result of the organization posting a video about the practice of using ostrich leather in the fashion industry.

Michelle Rios: I hope everyone on here is a vegetarian. It is no different to other animals, such as cows. They are farmed for human food, leather goods (including the shoes you wear), and what humans don't eat is put back in the food chain. Even this film shows that the ostriches provide food as well as leather and other goods.

Terry Norris: Are you suggesting that all of this is acceptable then?

[deleted comment]

Liam Buck: It's not acceptable to treat any animal like it's life is worth nothing and to abuse and torture it. [sic]

Chantelle Nichols: Torturing and abusing = eating. Seriously go troll somewhere else

[deleted comment]

Chantelle Nichols: You need a life

[deleted comment]

Chantelle Nichols: Reported for spam. Seriously no one cares and it's getting old. We all know you're fake. Give it up

[deleted comment]

Chantelle Nichols: It's not gonna go through [*sic*]

In this scenario, an apparently genuine user (Michelle Rios) posts a comment, which appears to justify this practice, and this provokes reactions from others. The trolling comment is met by strong disapproval from other users, while further comments from the troll are reported as spam and deleted by the organization without further explanation. Based on daily observations of the online community, it was possible to record and compare when user content was removed or missing. The recordings substantiate that expurgating is atypical for this online community. Such authoritative intervention is reactive in its nature, i.e., the organization deletes trolling incidents only when users demand it. Thus, expurgating in this form has a two-fold purpose: (a) it allows the organization to demonstrate its commitment to devoted supporters, while adhering to the community rules, and (b) it reduces the frequency of trolling comments by removing repeated trolling comments.

Asserting

When using the asserting strategy, the organization takes a more direct approach to managing trolling. Asserting can be defined as the organization making a value-laden statement about an ethical issue causing the trolling. The primary purpose of this strategy is to explicitly address the troll(s) by dismissing their comment(s). This is often done through forcefully reiterating the organization's opinion about a specific ethical issue, as demonstrated in the example below.

Lillie Coles: It's fun to watch though

Borys Mccann: It would be funny to watch you get gorged instead!

Lillie Coles: Nah I'd kill the Bulls man

Hoorain Jenkins: Lillie why are you even on this site? You clearly don't support PETAs goal
[sic]

PETA: Cruelty is never entertainment! #NotOurs2Use

This excerpt involves a troll (Lillie Coles) posting a comment that mocks the unethical practices of bullfighting, which the organization advocates against. The comment is followed by another user (Borys Mccann) trolling the troll and the organization taking on a more authoritative position by explicitly addressing the troll and dismissing her comment. No explanation or justification is provided to support the organization's intervention, which is also complemented with a hashtag to further raise awareness of the issue.

Another example of asserting is demonstrated in the following excerpt where the organization again directly dismisses the troll's comment.

Katie Murphy: Why cant people just leave animals alone and let them live there lives in peace, every animal has a purpose for being on earth, we don't own them. Why cant we all live together in peace and respect each other. [sic]

Sherry Gunter: Cant leave them alone because they taste so good!! And most animals are owned....[sic]

PETA: There is no excuse for this cruelty. (broken heart emoji) Animals are #NotOurs2Use

In this excerpt, a supporter of the organization posts a comment, which is followed by a trolling comment (Sherry Gunter) that teases and mocks the supporter's opinion. As a result, the organization intervenes by repudiating the troll, while asserting its opinion and including the same hashtag to raise awareness of the issue. In our data, we observed that this strategy reduces the frequency of trolling comments, but not their severity.

Mobilizing

Mobilizing involves the organization urging the trolls to reconsider their stance towards an ethical issue. Mobilizing is usually complemented by an informational statement about the issue at hand causing the trolling to possibly enhance the impact of the intervention. This is exemplified in the following excerpt.

Martin Newman: So animals can kill/eat other animals but humans cant (thinking face emoji) (thinking face emoji) (thinking face emoji) [sic]

Harry Ellis: Hahaha one comment completely destroys peta

PETA: There is no need for humans to kill & eat animals to live a healthy life. For more information on how meat affects the environment, please see the following page: <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/meat-environment/>

In this excerpt, a user (Martin Newman) intentionally posts a teasing comment aimed at mocking the organization, which is followed by a comment from another user who concurs in a satirical manner. In response to this, the organization intervenes by outwardly disagreeing with the troll, while urging him to take action and reconsider his stance.

A similar instance, shown below, demonstrates the organization advocating the trolls to arrive at a decision of their own accord regarding more ethical consumption choices.

Mark Bird: Going Vegan wont save the planet though [sic]

Natalie Morley: google it, you'll see!

Rick Gale: so what can you do to save the plant?

Josh Conner: in peta's POV only beef is non veg [sic]

Amanda Kinney: And the animal industry is too big and too important that it won't stop, so it's a bit of a wasted effort

PETA: Eating animals is a leading cause of deforestation, greenhouse gas emission, pollution, climate change, and land, water, food and other resource waste. Watch Cowspiracy (available on Netflix) to learn more about how your choices impact others: <http://www.cowspiracy/facts/>

In this example, a troll (Mark Bird) posts a pseudo-sincere comment that mocks the organization's stance on veganism and thus provokes reactions by other users. The

organization's subsequent intervention includes an informational statement complemented by referring to a third-party source of information that explicitly urges the troll to reconsider his opinion. While this strategy can be perceived as outcome-oriented, we did not observe a change in the trolls' stance. The trolling comments continued to be as extreme, but we observed a decrease in their frequency.

During our observations, it was apparent that PETA favored community members and opinions that shared the organization's values. This was also the case in instances where supporters of the organization engaged in behaviors that trolled the troll. In these instances, the organization did not intervene and remained partial to what could be perceived as offensive content posted by like-minded community users. In fact, there were instances, as shown below, where the organization itself engaged in a similar behavior to the trolls by mocking them.

James Thornhill: I think @PETA missed the step where they're supposed to add the minced chicken in the pretzel.

PETA: You must have thought really hard to come up with that one. Here is something you won't have to think very hard about: <https://how-to-go-vegan.peta.org/>

In this data excerpt, PETA reciprocated by trolling a user who teased the organization for posting a vegan recipe on their community. This behavior was not atypical for PETA and was often followed by a statement urging the trolls to reconsider their stance (i.e., mobilizing).

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Studies on trolling management in social networks are currently limited to investigations of the user (micro-level) or platforms (macro-level) perspectives (e.g., Gillespie, 2010; Hardaker, 2010). The present study, in turn, advances the information management literature by presenting the organizational (meso-level) trolling management perspective and thus complements the current knowledge on this topic.

First, our findings demonstrate that organizational strategies used to manage trolling in online communities can be distinguished based on whether they directly or indirectly address the trolling behaviors. We offer a new perspective whereby the organization chooses between strategies that explicitly intervene with individual trolling instances (i.e., expurgating, asserting and mobilizing) and more implicit strategies that address the behaviors surrounding the trolling incident without acknowledging the troll directly (i.e., non-engaging, educating and bolstering). This complements the current micro-level versus macro-level trolling management paradigm, which distinguishes between managing individual trolling behaviors (e.g., Hardaker, 2010) as opposed to managing the building blocks of these (e.g., Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). We also demonstrate that a ‘middle’ approach exists where organizations (as opposed to Internet users or platforms) take charge of trolling management.

Second, we contribute to the literature by identifying six distinct organizational trolling management strategies. Some of these are novel to the literature (i.e., educating, mobilizing, asserting), while others have been identified in past studies (i.e., non-engaging, expurgating, bolstering). Non-engaging is a passive strategy and a common approach to dealing with trolling. Various past studies confirm the use of this strategy in user-hosted online communities (e.g., Binns, 2012; Hardaker, 2015). Specifically, past findings have shown that depriving the troll from attention may be a viable strategy and we confirm that organizations also adopt a non-engaging approach.

Educating is a strategy whereby the organization indirectly disagrees with the troll through providing additional information about the topic causing the trolling behavior. Past research has put forward similar implicit interventions such as accepting the troll into the conversation until its severity is determined (Jenks, 2019; Johnson, 2018). Educating thus offers the organization an opportunity to allow the troll to remain in the discussion, while enabling the community host to ‘educate’ the troll on issues causing the trolling. Our findings

demonstrate that educating does not lead to a reduction in trolling instances and past research confirms that such an accommodating approach fails to influence community members' opinions or behaviors (Hauser *et al.*, 2017).

Bolstering is another indirect trolling management strategy. This strategy is used to positively reinforce users who support the organization during a trolling incident and can be linked to Binns' (2012) 'gamification' approach. While Binns (2012) recommends that desirable behaviors can be rewarded through awarding tokens, bolstering involves the organization verbally reinforcing its supporters, while indirectly dismissing the claims made by the troll. Bolstering may ultimately contribute to collective empowerment within online communities, which is found to create an overall positive environment and thus may discourage trolling from taking place (Khobzi *et al.*, 2019).

In contrast to these indirect approaches, mobilizing and asserting are strategies that explicitly address the troll(s). On the one hand, mobilizing requests the trolls to reconsider their stance on an ethical issue. Past research has found that trolling behaviors can be effectively managed through negotiating appropriate behaviors with the parties involved (e.g., Herring *et al.*, 2002). Mobilizing, in turn, allows the organization to encourage users to adopt behaviors that the organization deems as appropriate and desirable. On the other hand, asserting represents a more forceful and value-laden statement by the organization repudiating the trolling comment and re-stating the organization's opinion. This strategy may be linked to past research findings showing that in response to trolling incidents users may challenge the trolls (Hardaker, 2015) or refute the claims made by the troll (Herring *et al.*, 2002). Mobilizing and asserting produce a reduction of the frequency of comments, but no change in the intensity of the trolling. We argue that this is because both the content and the tone of these strategies is somewhat assertive, which Grinstein and Kronrod (2016) demonstrated does not produce the desired compliance in the context of pro-social behaviors.

Lastly, expurgating represents an infrequently used direct trolling management strategy, which involves the permanent removal of trolling comments. Previous research has identified this as an option to trolling management (Herring *et al.*, 2002). In line with past findings, expurgating in this context rewards users who report trolling by permanently removing trolling comments (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017).

5.2. Managerial implications

Trolling management in a Facebook community takes place in the public sphere where an entire network of active and passive users can continuously observe the way in which the organization manages trolling behaviors. Thus, trolling management can have an impact not only on the actively involved community members (i.e., contributors and superusers), but also on the observers (i.e., lurkers) who account for 90% of online community actors (Van Mierlo, 2014). Trolling management in online communities has therefore become a multi-user dialogue, which enables organizations to continue to promote their agendas and encourage users to contribute to the online community's discourse. Since users of online communities perceive trolling management to be the host's responsibility (Johnson, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017), organizations are advised to pro-actively select strategies, which fit to a desired outcome.

Our study identified six trolling management strategies that an organization uses in its online community. These can be distinguished based on whether the organization chooses to directly or indirectly intervene. The most frequently adopted strategy by the organization is non-engaging. Although the organization appears to choose this strategy irrespective of the trolling severity or frequency, we recommend cautiousness when using a non-engagement approach. This is because the presence of unmoderated trolling in online communities may discourage observers from engaging in otherwise meaningful interactions with others. Non-

engaging, however, may be appropriate in the presence of multiple active community members who expose the trolls and dismiss their comments, as shown in our results.

The remaining strategies in this regard seem particularly useful for organizational trolling management practice. Bolstering, for instance, indirectly addresses the trolling behavior(s) by encouraging like-minded users to voice their opinions. Bolstering may further stimulate the tie-strength between members in online communities and possibly discourage trolling from taking place. Educating is another indirect trolling management strategy. This strategy involves the community host providing reliable information to manage trolling comments, which is what users expect in organization-run communities (Hallier Willi *et al.*, 2019). Compared with other strategies, we find that educating is a somewhat neutral strategy whereby the organization does not directly address community members or take sides when trolling occurs. As such, it has the potential to attract the attention away from trolling and towards more constructive, informational exchanges.

Organizations, however, may prefer more direct approaches to trolling management. An asserting strategy, for example, allows the organization to refute the claims made by the troll, while simultaneously re-iterating the organization's values. Likewise, mobilizing can be used by organizations to directly disagree with the trolls, while enabling the organization to encourage the trolls to take action towards an ethical issue that the organization already promotes. These strategies may be useful in promoting the organizational agenda further and help reduce the frequency of trolling, but due to their value-laden nature they should be used with caution. While asserting and mobilizing interventions may be successful in minimizing further trolling occurrences, the one-sided nature of these strategies has the potential to spark further similar discourse. Lastly, expurgating involves removing trolling comments from the discussions. An expurgating strategy allows the organization to exert direct control over and stop this deviant online behavior. This demonstrates compliance with its community rules,

while simultaneously rewarding the users reporting the troll by permanently removing the trolling posts.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Owing to the novelty of this research area, there are limitations that raise the need for more academic work on the topic. First, the empirical findings are derived from one social networking channel (Facebook) and based on a single case study (PETA). Scholars concur that Facebook represents a good study site for emerging online phenomena (Khobzi *et al.*, 2019) such as ‘social media brand trolling’. However, we recommend that future studies investigate the organizational perspective utilizing other social networking channels such as Twitter as well as different types of online communities (e.g., from more commercial or self-managed contexts). To gain a fuller understanding of the rationale behind adopting each strategy, future researchers should also conduct interviews with organizational moderators who can further contextualize and validate our trolling management typology.

While we aimed to adhere to an established definition of trolling in this study, there is still an ongoing disagreement in the literature about the nature and exact characteristics of trolling, which has impacted the manner in which our trolling management strategies are conceptualized. Future studies should therefore focus on providing definitional and conceptual clarity with respect to trolling, which would significantly improve our understanding of its management. For example, studies may investigate whether our typology of trolling management may be suited to other online misbehaviors as well as trolling.

The information management literature would further benefit from testing the effectiveness of trolling management strategies (Buckels *et al.*, 2014). While the purpose of this study was to provide an initial understanding of current organizational practices regarding trolling management, there is a need for quantifying the outcomes, ideally in an experimental

fashion (e.g., compare the effect of each strategy on reducing trolling severity, community engagement and re-visiting intentions). Moreover, while our study specifically investigated the organizational perspective in managing trolling, some of the identified strategies may also be suitable to user-hosted (tertiary) communities and future research should confirm this together with the perceived reactions from peers. A related future research opportunity lies in taking a more holistic look at the combined effect of community members managing trolling and the perceived need for the organization to get involved.

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